DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 988 IR 018 401

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TITLE Wyoming Tombstone Symbolism: A Reflection of Western Culture.
PUB DATE Jan 97
NOTE 11p.; In: VisionQuest: Journeys toward Visual Literacy. Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (28th, Cheyenne, Wyoming, October, 1996); see IR 018 353.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Images; *Cultural Traits; *Imagery; Pictorial Stimuli; Social Influences; Symbolism
IDENTIFIERS Cemeteries; *Grave Markers; United States (West); Visual Communication; Visual Imagery; *Wyoming

ABSTRACT

Eleven cemeteries in Wyoming are examined for visuals pertaining to life in the West. The purpose is to demonstrate the importance of Western culture tradition evidenced through tombstone symbolism--representations of the activities and environments of the living through the memory provided by the deceased. The visual symbols found on the tombstones are presented in the following categories: environment, artifacts, and people. Environmental features that occurred most frequently were related to water, wind, wildlife, trees, wildflowers and mountains. The artifacts of Western culture represented on the tombstones centered on technologies that have been developed to cope with the Western environment, including homes, apparel, transport systems, mechanisms for protecting and identifying belongings, and methods for obtaining needed resources. In the category, people, the occupations most often reflected in the tombstone motifs were associated with agriculture, railroading, mining, and timber, as well as themes dealing with the lifework of the cowboy. As the tombstones represented in this study demonstrate, a society's culture is reflected in the memorial visuals that can be found in cemeteries. Thirty-one figures show tombstones from the three categories. (Contains 11 references.) (AEF)

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Wyoming Tombstone Symbolism: A Reflection Of Western Culture

by John Cochenour & Landra L. Rezabek

Abstract

Eleven Wyoming cemeteries are examined for visuals that can be related to Western culture and tradition. A rich tradition of such symbols found in the study are presented within the following categories: environment, artifacts, and people. The study concludes that memorial visuals reflect to a great degree the culture and traditions of the surrounding society.

You was there when Ed got hisn,
Boy that killed him's still in prison,
And old Lucky George is rich and livin' high.
Poor old Tom, he come off worse,
Got his leg broke, died of thirst,
Lord but that must be an awful way to die.
Bruce Kiskaddon

Cowboy poetry speaks to people about many themes, but the struggle of living life in the West is one theme that recurs frequently. As the above stanza from Kiskaddon states, being a cowboy was never as glamorous as it appears in the movies. Not withstanding this reality, most people who live in the West, certainly those who live in Wyoming, seem to be proud of the traditions, individualism and toughness demonstrated by the earlier occupants of this land, native and emigrant alike. This attitude is evident from the high number of Western motifs that can be seen on the tombstones in Wyoming cemeteries. In eleven cemeteries in Wyoming, the authors classified a large number of visuals pertaining to life in the West that are summarized in this paper. The purpose is to demonstrate the importance of Western culture and traditions of the people who live and die in Wyoming by sharing tombstone symbolism—representations of the activities and environment of the living through the memory provided by the dead. In this way the authors hope to contribute to answering the question, "What can the images on tombstones tell us about the people and culture that produced them?"

The visuals are arranged in the following categories: environment, artifacts, and people. Within each category, visuals and interpretations will be presented from tombstones that reflect some aspect of Western life or tradition. We have interpreted this tradition as that represented by the American pioneer during the latter half of the 19th century. Unfortunately, this limitation ignores the significant traditions and

Figure 1
Water—windmill and stock tank.

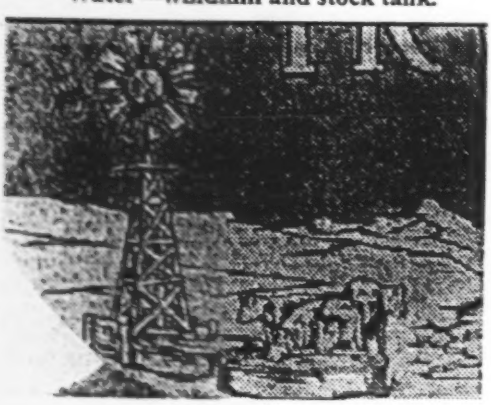

Figure 2
Water—Fishing in stream.

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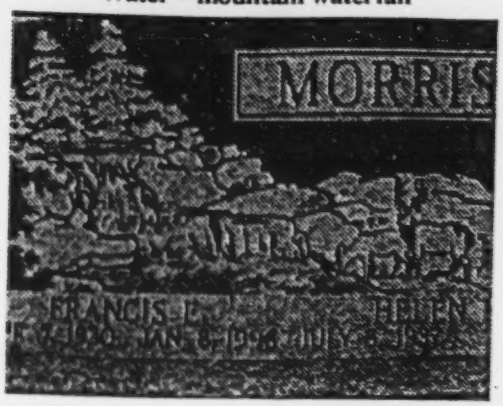
Figure 3
Water—mountain waterfall



culture of the Native American as well as others.

Environment

As with any culture, Western tradition is very much influenced by the environment in which it exists. In Wyoming, the most significant features of the environment are the broad vistas and high elevations, the semi-arid climate, the wind, the natural resources and geologic features, the wildlife, and the plant life. The environmental features that occurred most frequently on tombstones were related to water, wind, wildlife, trees, wildflowers, and of course, the mountains.

Traditionally, water symbolizes a source of life, a vehicle of cleansing, and regeneration (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; Hall, 1994). Within the Western traditions of Wyoming, examples of the use of water as an environmental, artifactitious, and personal symbol on tombstone visuals are numerous. Figure 1 is a good example of the use of water to symbolize life in a semi-arid region. The windmill, stock tank, and cattle combine to form a picture of a life spent where water was hard bought and welcomed—a source of life. Figure 2 is of a stone that on the surface portrays a life that enjoys fishing. This sport is certainly not limited to the West, however the combination of the mountains, evergreens, and stream is a Western motif that provides strong symbolism of the regeneration of the soul. The deer, waterfall, rocks, and trees in Figure 3 seem to speak to each of the water themes and symbolizes a pure, unblemished setting that is full of life and generation.

Figure 4
Wind—windblown trees.

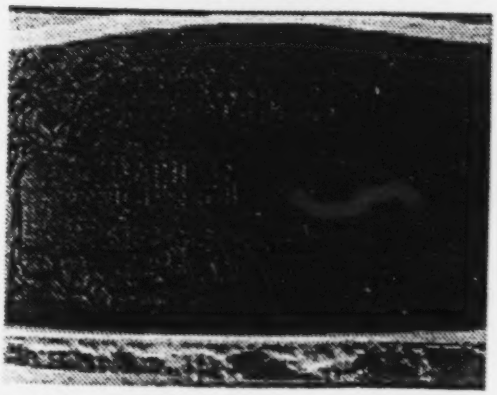
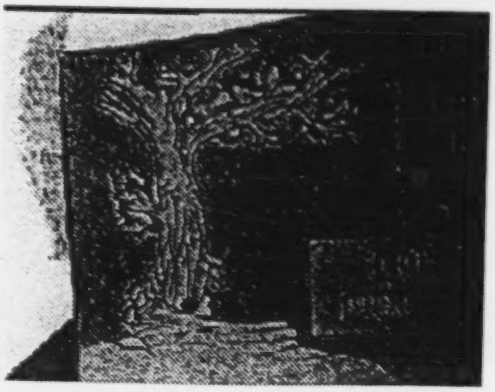


Figure 5
Wind—banner tree



The wind in Wyoming is legendary and is an integral part of the region's folklore. For example, it is said that in Wyoming the snow doesn't melt—it just wears out. The wind is an elemental force that is often associated with God's breath or as a messenger or manifestation of God. However, on the stone shown in Figure 4 the wind is probably used to characterize the setting as farm on the high plains. The symbolism helps the observer to place this ranch in Wyoming, not some other rural setting with a calmer climate. Figure 5 illustrates the effect of the wind in the cold, dry air at higher elevations. Known as banner or flag trees, the strong, cold winds at higher elevations destroy new

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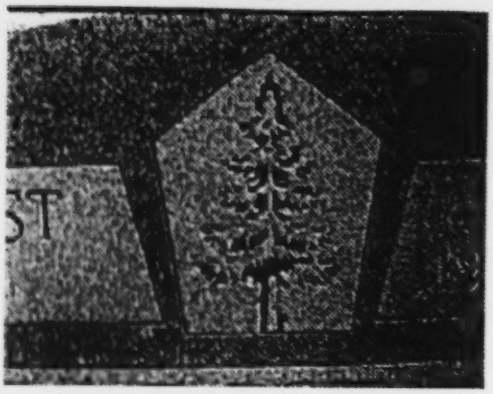
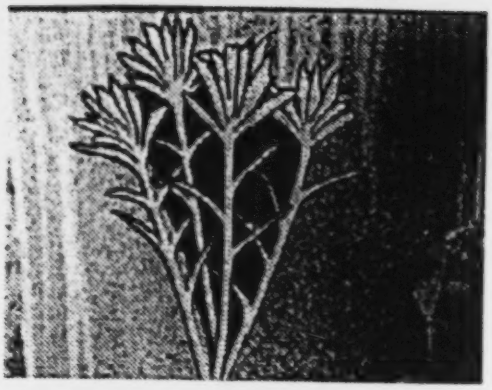
Figure 6
Plants—evergreen trees



growth on the windward side of exposed trees. Along the tree line (trees don't grow above this elevation), these twisted and bent trees often will not grow above the shelter of nearby rocks and are called "krummholz" trees. These trees may look strange but may be several hundred years old, and their use on the tombstone may symbolize an indomitable spirit, persistence, and toughness.

Trees are rich and widespread symbols with multiple meanings. One of the most common is its symbolism of life as a connection between earth and sky. The simple pine tree in Figure 6 could be symbolic of the relationships between heaven and earth, and the evergreen is representative of the immortality of the soul (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). Evergreens are found abundantly throughout the Rocky Mountains and certainly are numerous Wyoming. Figure 7 continues the tree motif, but displays only the pine cones on a branch which conveys a message of immortality and fertility (Hall, 1994).

Figure 8
Plants—Indian Paintbrush



Flowers also have multiple meanings, but flowers generally symbolize a passive principle. Like the chalice or rain, flowers are represent a receptacle of God's instrumentality (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). Flowers are abundantly represented on tombstones, but in Wyoming, as well as in other Western states, wildflowers seem to occur more frequently as a tombstone motif. Figure 8 is a good example of the use of wildflowers, depicting Indian Paintbrush, the Wyoming State Flower, used on a family stone in Wheatland.

Although a large variety of wildlife roam the Wyoming mountains and high plains, perhaps the most representative large mammal is the pronghorn antelope. There are nearly as many antelope in Wyoming as there are people and

Figure 7
Plants—pine cones

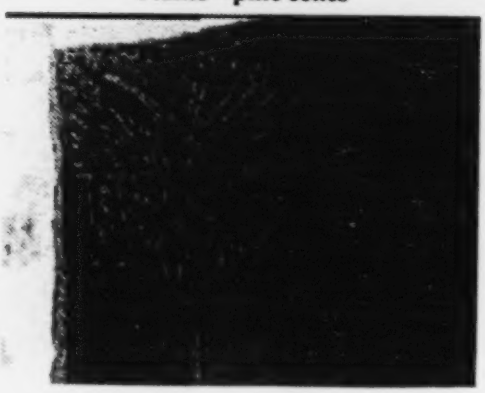
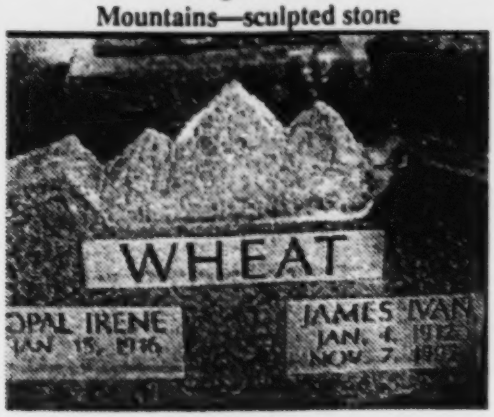


Figure 9
Wildlife—pronghorn antelope

Figure 10
Mountains—sculpted stone



this number comprises nearly half of the world's population of pronghorns. The pronghorn is the second fastest mammal in the world, being exceeded only by the cheetah, and is one of the most commonly seen large animals in Wyoming (Pitcher, 1993; Roberts, Roberts, & Roberts, 1994). The symbolism of the pronghorn is distinctly one of Wyoming and the West and is associated with keen eyesight, swiftness, and like the wind, one of God's messengers. Figure 9 is a good example of the pronghorn antelope imagery on tombstones.

Dominating the environment of many Western states, and certainly that of Wyoming are the mountains. The mean elevation of Wyoming is 6700 feet and the University of Wyoming is the highest NCAA Division IA campus in the United States at 7200 feet in elevation. There are 12 major mountain ranges in Wyoming, and most people who live in Wyoming live in the shadow of at least one of these ranges (Pitcher, 1993). It is no wonder that one of the most common motifs on Wyoming tombstones is that of the mountain landscape. The mountains represent the meeting of heaven and earth—the home of the gods. Many mountains have been given a quality of holiness by the people who live near by, and many diaries of Westerners make note of the majesty of the Rocky Mountains. In his journal dated 2 June 1846, mountain man James Cayman noted, "the mountains that surround this vally are pictureesque and many places beautifull being high and near the base smoothe and well set in a short nutericious grass [sic]" (Cayman, 1984, p. 258). The mountains make not only a beautiful picture, but symbolize the higher properties of the soul, the bounds of human development, and the abode of deities (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). Figures 10 and 11 are typical uses of mountain symbolism on tombstones.

Figure 11
Mountains—landscape

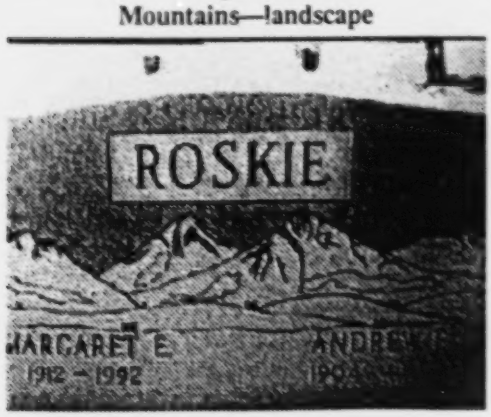
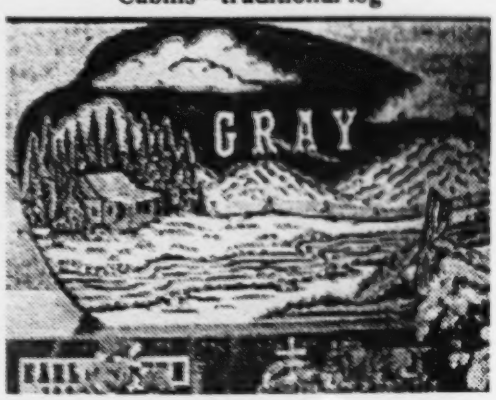


Figure 12
Cabins—traditional log



Artifacts

The artifacts of Western culture are primarily technologies that have been developed to cope with the Western environment. Such technologies are represented by homes that use available materials, apparel to match the environment and livelihoods, transport systems to deal with the rough country and vast distances, mechanisms for protecting and identifying belongings, and methods for obtaining needed resources. Each of these technologies have been

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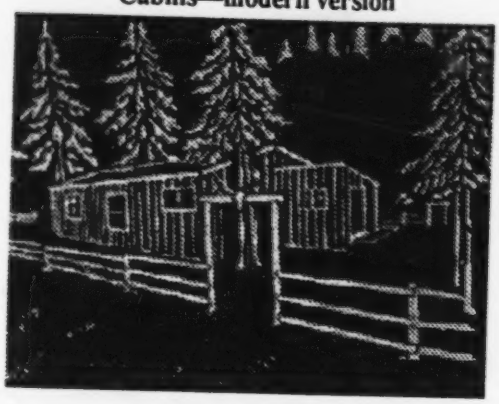
portrayed to some degree on Wyoming tombstones.

There are many images on tombstones that either symbolize everlasting shelter or possessions that have been left behind in regional relocation or in death. Log cabins are a common example of this theme in Wyoming cemeteries. For many early pioneers, a permanent home was simply a dream. Their imaginations coupled together with available resources often fashioned rather desperate shelters. The log cabin in the mountains was often small, real windows a luxury, and dirt floors a reality (Butruille, 1995). Nonetheless, the log cabin represented a safe place to live and shelter from the weather. Figure 12 is a log cabin refuge for eternity for a couple buried in Sundance, Wyoming. A more up-to-date cabin is pictured on the back of a marker in Figure 13.

Figure 13
Cabins—modern version



Getting across Wyoming was a major effort in the early days of Caucasian settlement and the various modes of transportation were the lifeblood of sustenance and growth for many Wyoming towns. Wagon trains on the Oregon Trail, freight and mail wagons on the Overland Trail, and the transcontinental railroad are each either directly or indirectly seen in the symbolism used in Wyoming cemeteries. The most common symbol of the wagon motif is the wheel. In itself, the wheel is symbolic of movement and liberation (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994), but the wagon wheel common in the cemeteries represented here seems to be reminiscent of the struggle and persistence of pioneer families. The broken wheel shown in Figure 14 could also indicate the impermanence of mortal life or perhaps bonds broken. As transportation technologies evolved, construction of the transcontinental railroad began at the Wyoming border in 1867 and became a major influence in the life and development of southern Wyoming. Cheyenne and Laramie were both end-of-track towns and hosted the procession of workers and hangers-on known as Hell-on-Wheels (Pitcher, 1993). The high point of elevation along the transcontinental route is just east of Laramie at 8,640 feet (Burt, 1991). Throughout the cemeteries in southern Wyoming, one will see references to the railroad in general and the Union Pacific Railway in specific. Figure 15 is typical of this imagery, while Figure 16 includes carpentry tools and a min-

Figure 14
Transport—wagon wheel

Figure 15
Transport—railroads

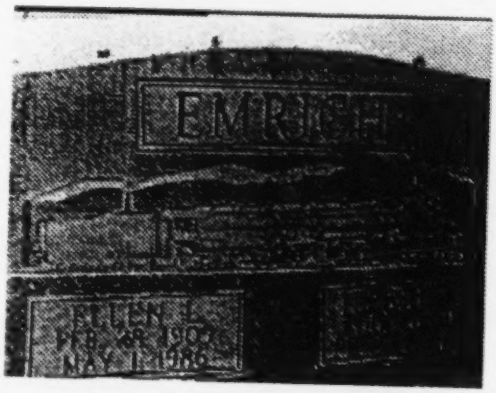
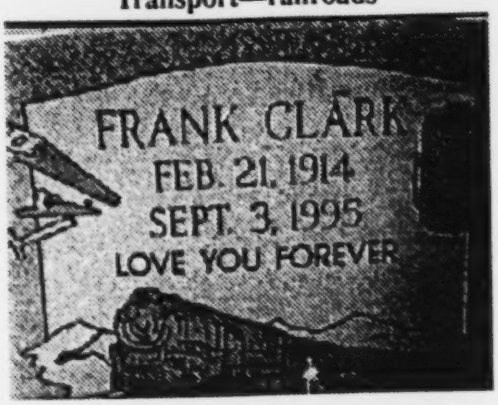


Figure 16
Transport—railroads



ers bucket with the railroad train, a melding of important Western occupational symbols still significant today.

Gates have universal significance as passages and particularly religious meaning relating to passage from the profane to the sacred (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). Gates to Western ranches and farms are often highly decorated (see Figure 17), and appear on tombstones with a combination of secular and religious meanings (see Figure 13). Associated with gates, one will see a variety of fencing used to protect property, hold livestock, or direct drifting snow. Figure 18 is an interesting use of barbed wire fencing to symbolize permanence and protection in a Western motif.

Branding, or burning a code or identifying mark on the hide of an animal, was a Spanish tradition that was used in the American West to

Figure 18
Fencing—barbed wire hearts

compensate for the lack of fencing on vast open ranges. Each brand is unique and has a registered owner; many families in Wyoming owning more than one brand as a result of marriage and inheritance (Pearson, 1996). These visual references to family, tradition, and ownership appear throughout the West and are often used on tombstones. Figure 19 combines the family brand with the windmill, cattle, and the sun to present a very positive symbol of Western life.

People of Wyoming

One thing that is not unique to the West, but that is reflective of individual pride and survival is the identification with one's name and family. A person's name is the most common marking found on a tombstone. In some cases, this inscription is simply a handwritten scratch on a rock. Figure 20 shows a rock slab with no vi-

Figure 17
Gates—ranch gate entrance

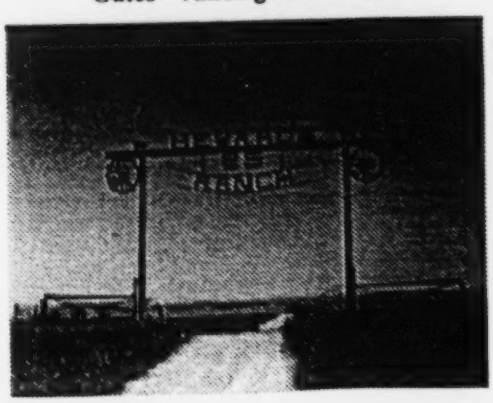


Figure 19
Brands—with cattle

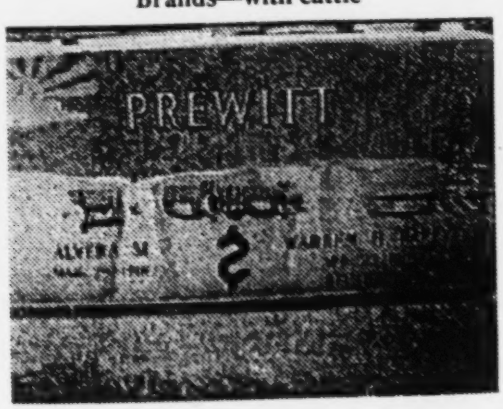


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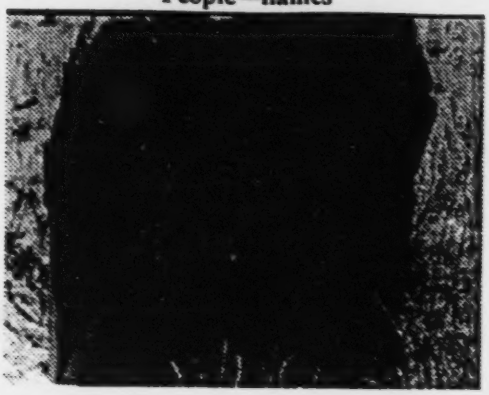
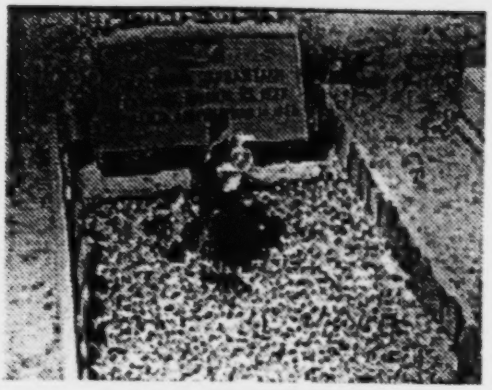
Figure 20
People—names



sual and only four scratched names: BERGEY WRAGER FRANCIS RIMMEK. Such rocks are common throughout the older cemeteries in Wyoming leaving one to wonder about the persons memorialized. Is this the grave of four people? Of two? Or does this marker identify the resting place of one early settler?

In life, people have an urge to scratch their name out in a "Kilroy was here" tradition. Immigrants traveling across Wyoming in search of new homes or new adventures often engraved their names in the rock faces that were located near the major trails. Three major sites, Names Hill, Register Cliff, and Independence Rock, are all adjacent to either the Overland Trail or the Oregon Trail. Independence Rock, a landmark that travelers hoped to reach by Independence Day, is probably the most famous milestone along the Oregon Trail and is mentioned

Figure 22
People—Greek



in the diaries of many travelers (Clyman, 1984). At one point, stone cutters charged from one to five dollars to cut a person's name in the rock, and about 50,000 names have been etched over the years, although erosion has claimed many of them now (Burt, 1991; Moulton, 1995). Names, a mark of one's presence or passing, are a visual reminder of the people who settled the West.

These settlers' names originate from many ethnic backgrounds. The American West was a beacon of opportunity to people throughout the world, and many of those immigrants passed through Wyoming, stayed to work in the mines or on the railroad, or settled on the land in some agricultural or other pursuit. The most uniquely recognizable ethnic backgrounds found in Wyoming cemeteries were Asian, Greek, and Russian. This was due in part to the use of their

Figure 21
People—Japanese

Figure 23
People—Russian

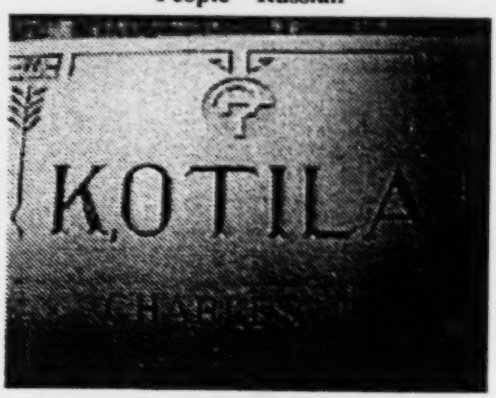


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Figure 24
People—comboys

native alphabets and languages on the headstones as well as icons that differed from the common Christian symbols found in the United States and Europe. Figures 21, 22, and 23 are examples of the diversity that can be found throughout Wyoming still today.

The occupations that provided work for this hardy group of Wyoming settlers were varied, but this paper focuses on livelihoods that commanded some of the larger numbers of people, although the population of Wyoming has never been great. One characteristic of Wyoming that visitors notice is the sense of emptiness that prevails in many areas. The population of the state in the 1990 census was still only 453,588. When these numbers are distributed over 97,914 square miles, people describe Wyoming as "a moderate sized city with very long streets". It is easy to imagine that in some occupations, a person could live a very solitary existence. The occupations most often reflected in tombstone motifs were associated with agriculture, railroading, mining, and timber.

In addition to these vocations, the lifework of the cowboy is very much associated with the West. The American cowboy is an intriguing historical figure with origins in Virginia and the eastern colonies as cowkeepers, cowdrivers, and cowpen men during the 1600 and 1700s. Often these herdsmen were slaves known as cow hunters or graziers and were highly skilled on horseback. In Texas during the early 1800s, the Anglo-American cattle traditions were blended with those of the Spanish-Mexican to shape the cowboy of popular legend. The name

Figure 25
People—cowboys

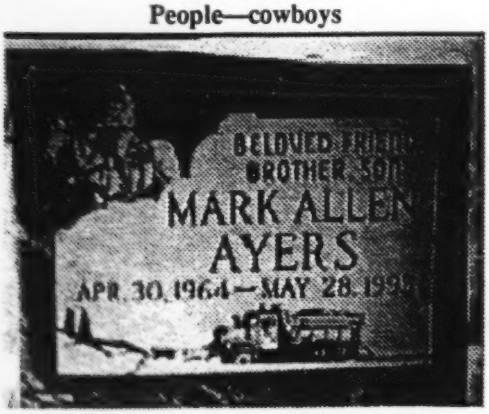
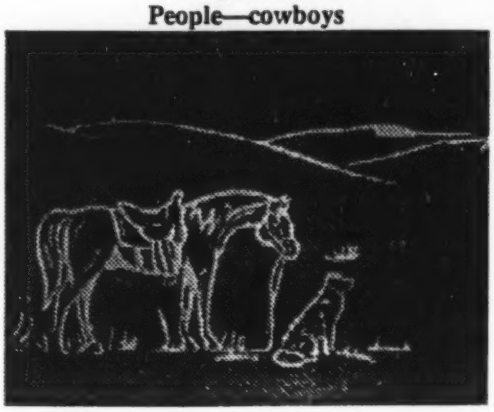


Figure 26
People—cowboys



cowboy seems to have been associated with raids during the Revolutionary War to obtain cattle to feed the armies, and also from raids upon the Mexican cattle ranches by Texas settlers. It would seem the early use of the term cowboy had some negative connotations (Tinsley, 1981).

The life of the cowboy during the heyday of the West was not easy. It could be dreary and full of hardship and hazard. The work was seasonal and low paying, tedious and lonely, and occasionally unpleasant and dangerous. In spite of all this, the cowboy hasheld a fascinating appeal and romance that has reached legendary proportions. The allure of the West is still typified by the cowboy, as evidenced by the bucking bronco and cowboy logo on the Wyoming

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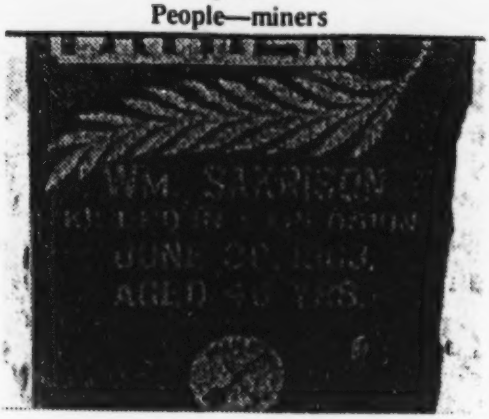
Figure 27
People—miners



license plate. Many people of Wyoming seem to take great pride in the cowboy tradition and use the many cowboy motifs to memorialize families and friends. Figure 24 reflects one aspect of the cowboy tradition—rodeo. This headstone uses the a bull rider visual to mark the resting place of a professional rodeo rider. Figure 25 is a more typical use of the cowboy image. This young man was most likely not a professional cowboy, but rather a person involved with horses and employed as a snowplow driver. Saddles, boots, horses and other items associated with the cowboy lifestyle are common on Wyoming tombstones. Figure 26 combines Western themes with symbolism of the fallen comrade, typified by the riderless saddled horse, and the life well-lived.

Mining has been an economic factor from the beginning of Wyoming's history. Coal, copper, platinum, gold, trona, and uranium are among the resources that have been sought in Wyoming (Burt, 1991). The symbolism of the mines and miners represents persistence, danger, hard work, and prosperity. The following figures are taken from the Hanna cemetery and are all associated with coal mining. Figure 27 highlights the work ethic of mining with the pick and shovel; the notation, "killed in explosion," is indicative of the danger. Figure 28 is of a memorial dedicated to miners who have lost their lives in local mining accidents. The back side of the memorial is full of names as well.

Figure 28
People—Miners

Two very interesting stones are in a family plot in the Hanna Cemetery. What is remarkable about both stones is the life stories that are told in visuals around the perimeter of the stone. The wife's stone (see Figure 29) includes visuals that portray family, the mountain environment and wildlife, needlepoint, a delicate rose, and cooking on a wood stove. These visuals symbolize a woman whose life was dedicated to service (food and cooking), gentleness (children and deer), femininity (rose), and family. Figure 30 is a close up of the cooking scene. For many pioneer women, an indoor stove was a wonderful luxury since it allowed one to work standing up, rather than stooping over a campfire (Butruille, 1995). The visuals on the husband's stone (see Figure 31) depict a life of work and a variety of occupations. Around the top of the stone appear visuals of an ocean fish-

Figure 29
People—wife's stone

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Figure 30
People—cooking

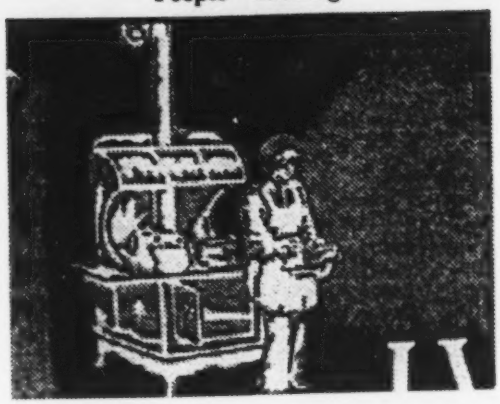
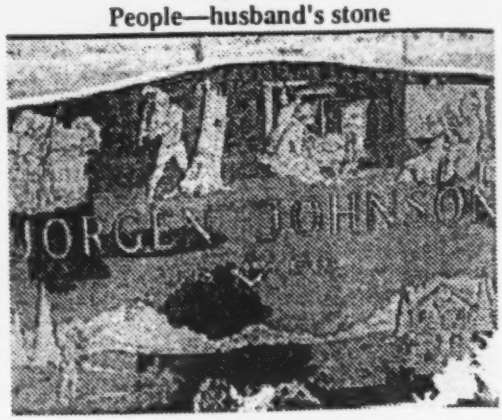


Figure 31
People—husband's stone



erman, a lumberjack, a miner, and a barber. At the bottom of the stone, visuals depict a man with his family in front of their home and a duck hunter. The combination of visuals on this tombstone lead one to the interpretation that this individual immigrated to Wyoming from a seafaring/fishing country, worked as both a lumberjack and miner, and finally worked as a barber later in life. The deceased seemed to enjoy the out-of-doors and provided for his family.

Conclusion

As the tombstones selected demonstrate, a society's culture is reflected in the memorial visuals that can be found in cemeteries. Wyoming cemeteries are full of religious symbols that are drawn from the beliefs of the people that use them, but the traditions of the West are prevalent themes as well. The folklore of cowboy and pioneer life, Western flora and fauna, environmental and natural forces, and the enduring mountains can be discovered throughout the sepulcher art used in Wyoming cemeteries. If, as conference attendees, you find yourself in Wyoming with time on your hands, the culture and traditions of Western life can be seen throughout any Wyoming cemetery. Visit one and see what the visual cues reveal about life and death in Wyoming.

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